

BY HERFRIED MÜNKLER

Will the American century indeed give way to the Chinese century? While this may be the case in terms of industrial production, it will be some time before China can dominate the international order and become the actor dominating the globe. At the moment, the US commands the economic potency and the military might to pursue its global interests. China, on the other hand, will not possess such resources for at least another decade, and perhaps for even longer.

Chinese leadership is, in fact, not targeting global domination, but rather large-scale zones of influence. In its crosshairs are Southeast and Central Asia as well as parts of Africa, not worldwide supremacy, as such grand ambitions would overtax China's resources and capabilities.

The foreseeable transformation of the international order, therefore, does not entail the emergence of a new "world's policeman," but rather a fundamental reconfiguration of this order. The existing world order relies on the presence of a custodian, but there is no country willing to step up and assume this responsibility. The US no longer wants it; China is unwilling and unable to pick up the mantle; and the same is true for the Europeans. At the dawn of our new decade, we are thus equipped with an international order that ought to have a guardian to enforce normative rules and regulations, but such a guardian no longer exists.

This is a politically perilous situation. There is a growing risk that misunderstandings and political power vacancies will lead to confrontations and ultimately to wars that no one wants.

What happens when large swaths of political geography are lacking a sorely needed custodian can be ascertained by examin-



A world without a keeper

America's retreat is giving rise to a new world order that lacks legal foundations and ethical norms

ing current developments in the Middle East as well as the neighboring Black Sea region. These areas are rife with hegemonic conflict like that between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which functions as a magnet dividing the region into friend or foe while drawing in neighboring powers, as is currently the case with Turkey.

The range of tasks facing a custodian of transnational order is as complicated as it is demanding – the oft-used term "world's policeman" falls far short of capturing all the facets of the role. "Investor in common goods" comes considerably closer to the mark. Such common goods can be an international currency that connects national economies with one another, or a binding international law of commerce, or even the organization of transnational goals like limiting climate change and preserving biodiversity. But the role can also include security policy tasks like mitigating arms races by issuing security guarantees, for example in the form of nuclear protection umbrellas that stem the proliferation of atomic weapons.

Thus, it is soft power rather than best characterizes the duties of a custodian. But when necessary, the guardian must also muster hard power to secure that order prevails.

By no means do these custodial systems need to have global dimensions; they can be limited to specific regions. In the second half of the 20th century, "the West" – Western Europe and the US – was one such system, as was the Eastern Bloc. In the West, the US was the custodian, in the East, the USSR; their roles were similar, while the means of executing their roles varied significantly.

This bipolar system was not truly global, as it was mainly limited to the Northern Hemisphere, but it had considerable radiance from the north into the global south. It was a system with tiered ambitions and expectations.

Spatial limitation and the gradation of obligations were beneficial to the responsibilities of the custodian, as goods that were once common became club goods. As a consequence, at the blessing of the custodian, only those who belonged to a club – i.e. a particu-

lar system of alliances – could participate, and entrance to the club was contingent on a proportional contribution to the provision of these goods. This prevented free-loaders and minimized the general burden of the custodian.

At the beginning of the 1990s, all this changed, as it was expected that the West would undergo a global expansion. Club goods then reverted to common goods, to which all had access, even those who did nothing to contribute to their availability. As a result, the burden on the custodian grew, whether or not it was prepared or even able to shoulder it. Under President Barack Obama, the US slowly retreated from its global commitments, and under President Donald Trump it demonstrably turned its back on them. "America First" became the catchphrase for this retreat, and it applied not only to the international order, but increasingly to the former West as well.

If China does not assume the responsibility temporarily shouldered by the US, it's because it has recognized that global systems always ultimately over-

whelm their custodians. Paul Kennedy has spoken of "imperial overstretch."

In other words, a custodian can only persist if the common goods for which he is responsible are transformed into club goods. For this reason, contrary to expectations prevalent in Germany, the United Nations will never be able to assume a global custodial role, however desirable such a scenario may be under normative conditions.

But what does this mean for the current transformation of our international order? It says a lot that the reconfiguration is leading to a system without custodians. The result will be an international order with fewer regulations and a reduction of its normative framework. In short, the project of adjudicating international policy is over.

In its wake, a series of major players will determine the global order, and they will only forge agreements among one another that are in line with their own interests. These major players will include the US, China, Russia (above all for its nuclear weapons

and its ability to deliver them), the European Union (yet only on the condition that it develop a greater ability to negotiate as a collective) and presumably India. There will also be a second tier of powers – and then all other states that are objects and not subjects of this international order. The US and the EU will perhaps cooperate more closely with one another than with others, but the old West will be a thing of the past.

International systems without custodians function most reliably if each member of the system is prone to forming coalitions with all other members; thus, each player must carefully consider which opposing coalitions it will provoke through its negotiations. This new world order lacks legal foundations and ethical norms and rests solely on unilateral calculations and self-interest. In terms of normativity, this is a great leap backward.

It says a lot that the decade ahead of us is already marked by the emergence of such a system. The further this development progresses, the more meaningless and ineffectual becomes any policy that attempts to adhere to the old model of order and that focuses on moral suasion, international standards and other elements that would call for a custodian the likes of which no longer exists.

This goes particularly for Germany's foreign policy, which already often seems stale and rather helpless. It has the propensity to warn against developments that have long since become fixed realities. Yet, the more one adapts to the new constellations, the more effectively Berlin can contribute to making Europeans the subjects – not objects – of the new world order.

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Western abdication

cratic elections under UN supervision – none of which have come to pass.

The mantra repeated by heads of state and foreign ministers in the West – that is, their insistence that resolving the conflict requires a political rather than military solution – has become an embarrassing phrase. It exposes the West's lack of strategic vision and sheer inability to act.

This mantra disregards one of the most basic rules of diplomacy: that a negotiated solution is only possible when all parties to the conflict no longer see the point in continued fighting. The situation in Syria would have to reach a stage where none of the stakeholders see any benefit to military escalation; only then would we see genuine willingness to compromise, thereby providing the diplomatic leeway needed to negotiate an agreement.

The conflict in Syria never reached such a point. For Assad, it's always been worthwhile to fight for survival, and his regime had everything it needed to win the war in military terms: weapons of mass destruction and the readiness to use them against its own citizens; a supporting world power – in this case Russia – that wanted to keep its last ally in the Middle East in power and was therefore willing to use its air force to destroy or expel all opponents of the regime; a regional power – in this case Iran – experienced in asymmetrical warfare and capable of organizing Shi'ite militias on the ground; a war-weary world power – in this case the US – that was cautious and in retreat; divided



Al Aleppo in ruins, 2019.

Europeans with no plan at all; a blocked UN Security Council; and, finally, the ignorance of the world community.

Attempts by the Americans and Europeans to put pressure on Damascus were limited to a complex regime of sanctions (painful for the Syrian leadership, but tolerable thanks to the help of allied trading partners), half-hearted arms deliveries to alternating rebel groups (too few arms to win, but too many to lose) as well as two symbolic and inconsequential attacks on military bases – both in violation of international law – as a way of punishing Syria for the use of chemical weapons. None of these actions led to any change in the Syrian regime's behavior or any increased willingness to compromise.

Against this backdrop, the idea that Europe could influence the balance of power in Syria and the realities on the ground by leveraging financial incentives for rebuilding the country is utterly naive. Any European parliamentarian – whether they represent a left-wing anti-imperialist or a right-wing nationalist party – who travels to

Damascus to be shown "normal everyday life" and the "stable security situation" by regime representatives, will automatically become an unwitting propagandist for Assad. And an effective supporter of Vladimir Putin's strategy.

In contrast to the US and Europe, the Russian president has a functioning plan in Syria. It comprises three stages: rescue, recapture and rehabilitate. Today, we are moving through the transition to phase three, the aim of which is to make the Syrian regime an accepted member of the international community once again.

The logic behind this strategy seems plausible: Assad has won and remains in power, so it makes sense to acknowledge this reality, to work constructively toward rebuilding the war-torn country, to improve conditions for its poor and to allow Syrian refugees to return.

The only problem is that anyone who wants to actually help the people of Syria would be wise not to support the Syrian regime. Indeed, every dollar and euro sent to Damascus with good intentions will only serve to further consoli-

date the very regime structures that led to the uprising nine years ago.

What unsuspecting politicians, journalists and bloggers perceive as stability in Syria is actually nothing more than what we would call *Friedhofsruhe* in German, namely that deathly calm felt in cemeteries. Assad needs the money to reward his cronies, to pacify the militias, to draw supporters closer to him through better living conditions and to maintain the secret service apparatus. He has no interest in the return of Syrian refugees from abroad; indeed, he deliberately drove most of them out of the country in the first place as a way of ridding himself of his enemies.

At the moment, Assad is delighted. After all, the UN has been working for years with government-related organizations, companies and individuals who continue to distribute aid money in a manner that suits his wishes. Some of these partners are even on US and European lists of sanctioned organizations; this is a true scandal, given that Washington and Berlin are the largest bilateral donors of humanitarian aid to Syria.

While Europeans and Americans continue to provide humanitarian aid to Syrians, thereby relieving Assad of that burden and freeing him up to pursue his Idlib campaign, Russia, Iran and Turkey are working to safeguard their long-term presence and commitment in Syria. The autocratic leaders of each of these countries simply don't see foreign policy as a diplomatic negotiation of compromises;

instead, they see it as the pursuit of a strategy of pure self-interest.

Of course, these leaders have no problem with Assad's authoritarianism, and this means that the Syrian regime can do whatever it wants on the domestic front. Not even the Kremlin can influence Assad's secret services. As a result, there can be no security guarantees from the Russian side for any Syrians wishing to return to their home country.

The efforts made by the three interventionist powers in the Syrian civil war have paid off. Although Ankara moved away from its original goal of regime change in Damascus, it is still able to use some of the Syrian insurgents as Islamist mercenaries to assert its own interests east of the Euphrates against the Kurds and now also in Libya. With its offensive in northeastern Syria in October 2019, Turkey drove the Democratic Union Party (PYD) into the arms of Assad and Putin, thereby preventing the creation of an autonomous Kurdish state in the medium term.

A rapprochement between Ankara and Damascus is possible; their secret service chiefs met in Moscow in January. Russia maintains three military bases in Syria and will therefore remain a presence in the East Mediterranean for decades. In addition, Russian companies succeeded in signing largely one-sided contracts for the extraction of oil, gas and phosphorus there.

Moscow is eager to strengthen state structures and contain militias in Syria – in contrast to Tehran, which is working to create a state

within the state in order to secure its own military, political, economic and social influence. The recently murdered General Qassim Soleimani was in the process of setting up Syrian paramilitary groups modeled after the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and fighting for Assad under local leadership. Iran's goal there is to repeat in Syria what it achieved with Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hashd al-Shaabi in Iraq. This would complete the Shi'ite "axis of resistance" extending from Tehran via Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut all the way to the Mediterranean and to the borders of Israel. However, this would be quite difficult in Syria, which has a Shi'ite population of only 2 percent.

The US and Europe have lost the conflict in Syria. In the short term, they should stand firm against the Syrian regime and against Russia's attempts at "peacemaking." They should put pressure on the UN to ensure that any humanitarian aid is given to the neediest people and not to Assad's network of cronies. In the long term, Europeans can place their hopes on the desire of the Syrian people for change, supporting their quest for freedom, justice and reconciliation wherever they can.

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